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## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND PASTORAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOLS

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It was quite a surprise for me to learn through the local media that "the heads of the [French] school district and the bishop had reached an understanding to gradually eliminate religious education from the schools": such a news item is enough to make me and a number of parents, teachers, and students react.

### A BISHOP'S MISSION

One of my main concerns as a bishop is that everyone, children and adults alike, receive solid religious and moral training, that they be real Christians within society, and that they be able to act as a leaven of healthy living, communion, and apostolate. To allow one to say or insinuate that the bishop of Edmundston has reached an agreement with school board officials to "eliminate" religious education from the school curriculum is tantamount to stating that the bishop of Edmundston is remiss in one of his main duties.

### THAT TRUTH BE TOLD

In November, 1998, I did meet with officials of school districts 3 and 5 - since some of the French parishes are served by these school districts - to take stock together of the religious instruction in our schools. As I wrote in December of 1998, in our diocese as in those of Moncton and Bathurst there was a tendency to leave catechetics to parishes: as a matter of fact, a certain number of schools had already stopped dispensing religious education, while other schools were allowing no more than fifteen minutes per week to the subject. There was no written directive from the Minister of Education but there were requirements of excellence and ever severe programme constraints, such that there were hardly any free periods left. Some school authorities decided on their own to suppress the subject of catechetics without prior consultation with the parents, the rumour being that religious education would be suppressed altogether within a few years. Given this state of affairs, together with the diocesan directors of religious education we studied the possibility of helping parents and teachers interested, and of offering family-based and parish-based religious instruction. We nevertheless requested that we be given time to organise and get the necessary resources. In all honesty I can state that the elimination of religious instruction in our schools is not a decision of the diocese.

### NECESSARY DISCUSSION

It seems to me that concerned parents and children have an inalienable human right to openly state whether or not to have religious education in school. The same goes for pastoral ministry in school. From what I can see, no such consultations were held, and we hear as an afterthought that there will no longer be any religious education or pastoral activity in schools. Maybe a few parents' committees were apprised of the decision, but I do not believe that parents as a whole have had a say in the matter. I believe that it behooves school and school district authorities to generate discussion. If we respect the person who opts for moral instruction, it would be justified and fair to respect the will and beliefs of the majority of parents.

## VALUES TO PROMOTE

If time can be found to promote personal and social values through certain yet-to-be-determined steps, how is it that we can find no time and personnel to promote quality religious education in school? When I visited Cormier School in Edmundston a delegation of Grade 7 students asked me to take steps to maintain religious education in their school. During this same pastoral visit I also went to the École Maillet and for nearly two hours the children there asked very serious questions concerning the Christian faith, the Church, and living in general; our children have an in-depth experience of wonderful values and they are not insensitive to meeting Jesus Christ. Is this not what religious education is all about: to meet the living God?

## DARING AND FAITH

Our people reacted with faith and daring, at the introduction of the 1870 legislation making our schools non-confessional and forbidding religious education; parents and teachers found ways of developing quality religious education. Religious communities were even founded to help with religious instruction. Our forebears fought and struggled, they would not admit defeat and that theirs become "godless" schools where one would no longer be allowed to pray or be taught the basics of the Christian faith. They understood the importance of training in Christian living.

## REASONS FOR HOPE

Far from wanting to "eliminate" religious education from our milieu, we have the challenge, the right, and the duty to promote religious education: our own future and that of our baptised children are at stake. In my pastoral letter of June 11, 2000, on the occasion of the feast of Pentecost, I shall expand further on the subject. I wholeheartedly congratulate the children, parents and teachers who take seriously and advance the cause of religious education in their own milieus. During this year 2000 when we celebrate the coming of Christ among us, we are invited to make him known and loved: this is a human being's only way to eternal happiness.

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